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SUBJECT: KEY UPA ALLY WINS TAINTED TAMIL NADU BY-ELECTION

¶1. (SBU) Summary: In a by-election projected by some as a preview of the upcoming Lok Sabha elections, Tamil Nadu's ruling DMK party, a key constituent of India's ruling United Progressive Alliance (UPA), won by a huge margin. The opposition AIADMK party saw the by-election as an opportunity to embarrass the ruling party, and the DMK responded with all-out effort to win the seat. The DMK's victory was, however, tainted by widespread charges of unprecedented levels of voter-bribing. The victory is a boost to DMK morale, but should not be seen as an indication of things to come in Tamil Nadu because it would be hard for the DMK to replicate the bribery and intensity of this one by-election in a state-wide election. End Summary.

Ruling DMK wins big in bellwether by-election

¶2. (SBU) All eyes in Tamil Nadu were trained on a January 9 by-election for a single seat in the state's legislative assembly. The death of a Member of the Legislative Assembly from the opposition MDMK party necessitated the by-election in Thirumangalam, near Madurai in southern Tamil Nadu. As this was the state's last election before the upcoming national elections to the Lok Sabha (India's parliament), many in the political and media establishment looked at the by-election as a leading indicator of where the state will go this spring.

¶3. (SBU) The ruling DMK party's candidate won the election in a landslide, getting almost twice as many votes as the candidate from the main opposition AIADMK. The DMK candidate received 79,422 votes; the AIADMK candidate received 40,156 votes; and the candidate from the upstart DMDK party won only 13,136 votes. Voter turnout was unusually high at 88.98%. (Note: In the last election in the Thirumangalam assembly constituency the turnout was only 70.93%. End note.)

AIADMK challenge results in focused DMK response

¶4. (SBU) Sensing an opportunity to embarrass the rival DMK before the national elections, AIADMK leader J. Jayalalithaa persuaded her ally MDMK, which had held the seat, to cede it to an AIADMK candidate. The Thevar caste, which is largely supportive of the AIADMK, dominates the assembly constituency. The fact that the state's communist parties had abandoned the DMK and joined her in opposition likely bolstered Jayalalithaa's confidence.

¶5. (SBU) The AIADMK challenge led to an all-out effort by the DMK to win the seat. DMK Chief Minister Karunanidhi entrusted the task to his two sons, heir apparent MK Stalin and the Madurai-based strongman MK Azhagiri. Dividing the 138,000 vote constituency into small segments, the DMK party apparatus assigned high-level officials -- state ministers and senior party leaders -- to canvass the constituency to ensure maximum DMK turnout. In an indication of how seriously Karunanidhi took the by-election, the Chief Minister skipped his planned participation in the important Pravasi Bharatiya Divas convention for Non-Resident Indians which was being held in Chennai on the day of the by-poll. Rather than serving as the guest of honor on a panel with other high profile Chief Ministers, including Gujarat's Narendra Modi and Andhra Pradesh's YSR Reddy,

Karunanidhi instead chose to monitor the by-election from DMK headquarters.

"Unprecedented" bribes to voters

¶6. (SBU) Journalists said that bribing of voters reached "unprecedented" levels in the Thirumangalam by-election. One reporter who has regular access to Chief Minister Karunanidhi told post that "the old man [Karunanidhi] told his party men to spend as much as needed to beat Amma [Jayalalithaa]" and joked on the by-election date that "it was already over two days ago with all the money DMK spent." An AIADMK contact who had spent 20 days campaigning in the constituency echoed this sentiment, telling us that his party's defeat was a foregone conclusion on account of the DMK's massive vote-buying program. He said he had never seen anything like it before, alleging that the DMK paid cash and merchandise (cell phones and white goods) of more than 500 USD per voter. The typical bribe that political parties offer in Tamil Nadu is usually somewhere between 10 USD to 20 USD per voter. The astronomical figure cited by our AIADMK contact is improbable in the Indian context and most likely inflated to make the point that exceptionally large bribes alone assured the DMK win. Media contacts agreed that the DMK had spent more money per voter than usual but could not confirm the precise amounts involved.

Worse than UP or Bihar?

¶7. India's Chief Election Commissioner N. Gopalaswamy, who is from Tamil Nadu and was on a personal visit to Chennai in the run-up to the by-elections, told reporters that "Tamil Nadu has overtaken

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Uttar Pradesh and Bihar" in terms of violations of the election code of conduct. Gopalaswamy was likely referring to January 5 television news reports which showed video images of MK Stalin clearly distributing cash to voters. According to media reports, the Election Commission of India has directed the District Election Officer to file a criminal case against Stalin for bribing voters. The AIADMK, for its part, was probably not innocent. While it could not match the ruling DMK bribe for bribe, there were several media reports of AIADMK officials offering money to voters.

¶8. (SBU) Chief Minister Karunanidhi was predictably pleased with the results, telling the media that the Thirumangalam victory indicated the people's mood and their appreciation of the welfare schemes of the state government. He indicated that Azhagiri would be soon given an appropriate post in the party. (Note: That would make Azhagiri the fourth person in the immediate family to hold an important position in either the party or the government. End note.) Jayalithaa characterized the Thirumangalam election as a defeat of democracy before the "money and muscle power" of the ruling party.

Shot in the arm for DMK but not a sign of things to come

¶9. (SBU) Comment: Although tainted by charges of bribery, the DMK's surprisingly high margin of victory has boosted the party's sagging morale. It may also have helped improve the frayed relations between the various factions in the DMK's ruling family. This can only help the UPA, of which the DMK is a critical component, in helping defend the large percentage of Tamil Nadu's parliamentary seats it holds. That said, the Thirumangalam by-election is by not necessarily a sign of things to come because it will be impossible for the DMK to apply the Thirumangalam model, which requires massive amounts of money and individual voter contact with high-level party officials, to a state-wide Lok Sabha contest. End comment.

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